

Fine farewell from fans

AYRESOME PARK customers have taken a bit of stick over the years because of their apathy, lack of motivation and the fact that Middlesbrough have never really been in the same league as Newcastle United and Sunderland for support—both in numbers and in intensity.

So it is pleasant to be able to give the fans a thoroughly deserved pat on the back for their wonderful ovation to the heroes of Wycombe Wanderers on Tuesday night, when a last-minute goal by David Armstrong put Boro through to the fourth round of the FA Cup and a home clash with Sunderland on January 25.

One really faithful supporter of Middlesbrough told me it got to the stage, late in the second half, when he actually wanted the part-timers to win because of the gallant fight they had put up. And I don't think he was alone.

I didn't quite share that view. I had Sunderland in mind and hopefully more thrilling Cup battles after that, so I was relieved and thankful when David coolly slotted home the winner.

Organised

But I appreciate how the admirers of the Isthmian League lads felt. And that admiration wasn't confined to the terraces. Man of the Match (for Boro, of course!) John Hickton told me afterwards he was surprised that the amateurs kept going so well for the full 90 minutes in both matches, the first meeting at Wycombe and Tuesday's second clash.

"It says a lot for their fitness, and for their organisation," he said. "And I was surprised, too, at the quality of their play. Against sides like this you've



TALKING IT OVER WITH CLIFF MITCHELL

just got to get a quick goal. It makes life such a lot easier.

"You're on a hiding to nothing. Little teams lift their game for the prestige matches. It's the big match of the year for them.

"But Wycombe really did play well."

Spontaneous

But all the players and their boss, were happy to proffer warm and unstinted praise to worthy opposition.

When Boro's players formed a guard of honour at the end and applauded their opponents to the dressing room, it was unrehearsed and unpremeditated. It was a spontaneous gesture of admiration—possibly mingled with a spot of relief!

The crowd, too, rose dramatically to cheer the Wycombe lads to the echo, and the Isthmian League club's manager, Brian Lee, was touched, as were his men.

Lee expressed the sincere hope that Boro would carry on to reach Wembley, and added that they were a fine side, full of character, and eminently capable of reaching the Cup Final.

So it all ended on a note of warm friendship—after all the "murderous" pre-match predictions!

And now we can really